This Issue In Three Sections

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By Harold Henderson

Fifteen miles south of the Loop and half a mile west of the Calumet Expressway lies a four-and-a-half-acre sliver of land, squeezed between the sludge lagoons of the Metropolitan Sanitary District and the embankment of the Chicago & Western Indiana Railroad. According to the Illinois attorney general, this quarter-mile strip of soil is thick with acids, caustics, solvents, oils, phenolics, sulfides, zinc, chromium, nickel, and paint sludge. Some were originally buried in drums; some were poured into hastily

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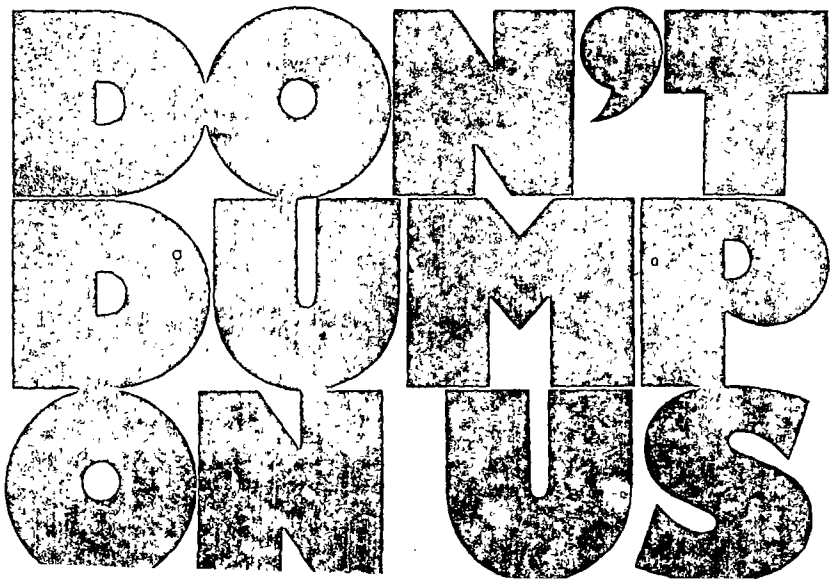

TO A NATURALIST, THE SOUTHEAST SIDE IS "THE HOME OF THE GREATEST CONCENTRATION OF RARE BIRDS IN ILLINOIS." TO A GEOGRAPHER IT COULD BE "ONE OF THE GREATEST ECOLOGICAL DISASTERS IN THE HISTORY OF NORTH AMERICA." THE RESIDENTS ARE UNDERSTANDABLY CONFUSED, BUT THERE'S ONE POINT ON WHICH THEY AGREE: THEY'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR GARBAGE.

Photographs by Loren Santow

▲ *Rennie Heath at U.S. Scrap, site of the underground fire of August 1985*

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excavated pits. The attorney general describes them as "a substantial present and potential hazard... to human health." Mixed in with the chemicals are railroad ties, rubble, and wood from demolished buildings.

Last August 16 the place caught fire.

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Fifteen miles south of the Loop and half a mile east of the Calumet Expressway, Rennie Heath maneuvers her gray Cutlass onto the edge of the gravel road that is the 12200 block of Stony Island Avenue. Giant trucks roar past, filling the air with dust and our conversation with pauses.

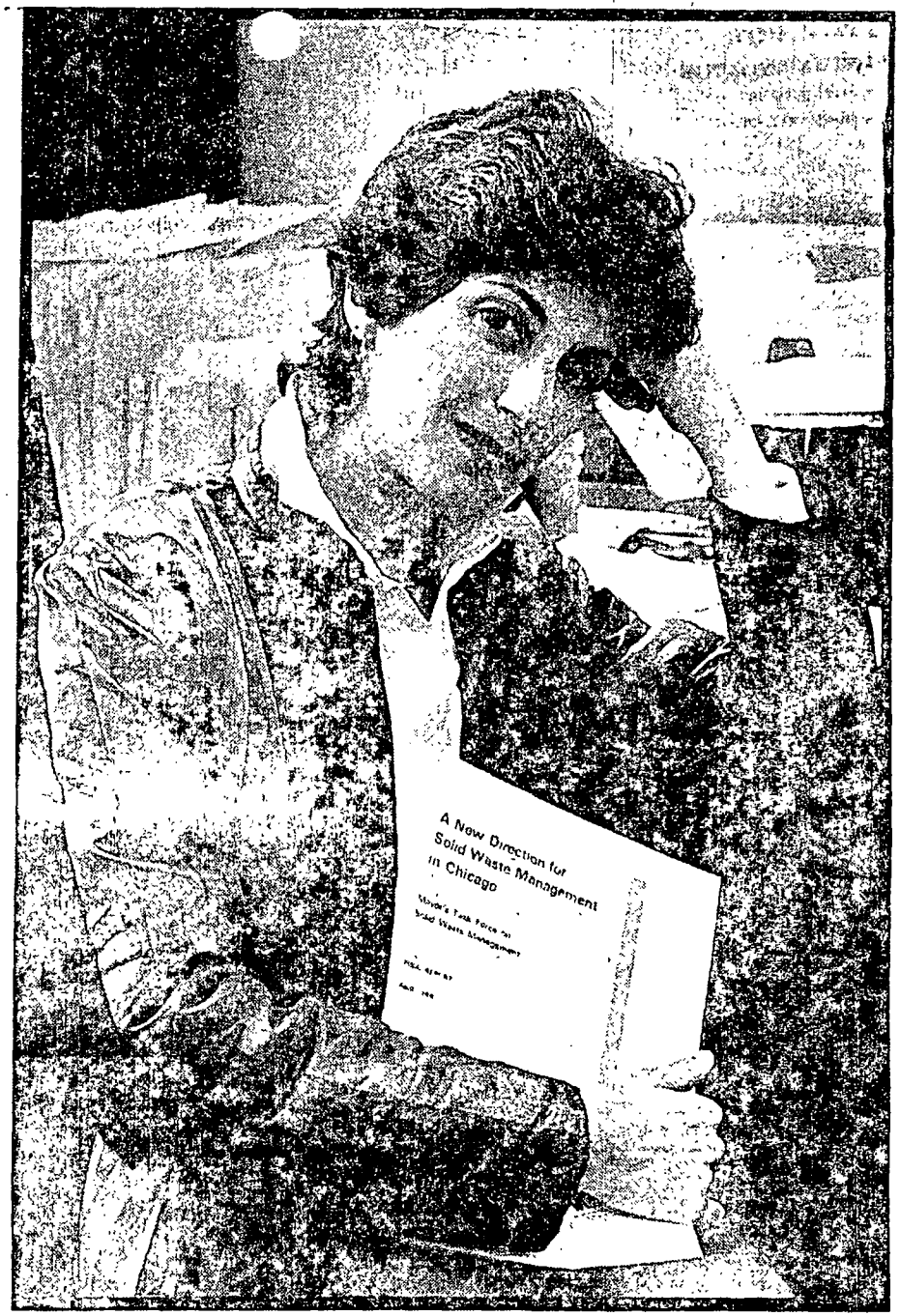
Next to the car, the road merges into a jumble of deceased tires, hunks of rubble, half-upholstered furniture ("That chair is new!" exclaims Sharon Pines from the backseat), and unidentifiable bits of rubbish and metal. We see the garbage, then a few big weeds and bushy trees, and an expanse of water the size of several city blocks, its surface interrupted only by a grove of dead trees, broken off above the water line like rotten teeth.

"This on your left," says Heath, "is Dead Stick Pond." It belongs to the Metropolitan Sanitary District, which has posted little blue-and-white signs, some of them almost too rusty to read: "CLEAN WATER: NO Trespassing Swimming Hunting Dumping."

On Heath's informal "toxic tour" of the southeast side, Dead Stick Pond is a regular stop—along with the bulging Paxton and Land and Lakes landfills north of 122nd Street; U.S. Scrap, the site of last summer's underground fire; the only PCB incinerator in North America located in an urban area; and the mountainous landfill at 134th and the Calumet Expressway.

Between 95th and Sibley Boulevard, King Drive and the Indiana state line—an area roughly twice the size of Evanston, squeezed into the lower right-hand corner of the city—Illinois EPA knows of 31 present or former landfills and "waste-handling facilities," and others have identified at least 23 additional old ones. If southeast Chicago is not, as some claim, the greatest concentration of waste dumps on the continent, it's close. One gets the impression of a postindustrial wasteland in which nothing stays healthy long. "Ever since I moved down here, I've had kind of a chronic sore throat," says Heath, who directs the South Chicago Economic Development Commission ("Sedcom").

A sort of gallows humor takes over the drive: Heath tells about the Port District functionary who solemnly assured her that water pollution had once been a problem in the Calumet area, but it wasn't anymore—because all the contaminants had settled on the bottom. "I went on my way reassured," she says with a Continental shrug and twist of the mouth, "asking, 'Why me?'" As we drive down Stony Island, two men appear atop the Paxton landfill's mountain of earth-covered refuse. "I don't even want to know what they are doing there," says Heath. "They might be picking up litter," says Pines, who is waste projects director at the Center for Neighborhood Technology, and who wryly wishes that EPA were as tough on what goes inside the landfill as it is on what blows around on top of it. Later, we peer at an abandoned "incinerator" jerry-built of old sheet metal at the U.S. Scrap site. Heath sighs, "I'm a resident of Pullman—a mile and a half from here, as the crow flies. Not that we have too many crows around here."



Sharon Pines

* * *

But, strange to tell, southeast Chi-

Robert Ginsburg

cago has no shortage of birds, black or otherwise. If you want to see a double-crested cormorant, a great egret, an American bittern, a marsh hawk, an osprey, an upland sandpiper, a Wilson's phalarope, a common tern, a black tern, a short-eared owl, a brown creeper, a veery, a common gallinule, a black-crowned night heron, or a yellow-headed blackbird—every one a threatened or endangered species in Illinois—then the southeast side is the place to be. The last three species nest regularly just east of Dead Stick Pond.

Dr. William Southern of Northern Illinois University recorded an "impressive" 170 bird species around Lake Calumet between August 1981 and August 1982. Writer Jerry Sullivan put it more directly in *Chicago* magazine last August, when he told a hypothetical reader strolling along a dirt path behind Dead Stick Pond, "You are entering the home of the greatest concentration of rare birds in Illinois." (Incidentally, the dead cottonwoods that give the pond its name weren't killed by toxic chemicals, but by flooding when the Corps of Engineers built a dike of dredged material there in the 1950s.)

So the city's junk heap is also a bird-watcher's paradise. More to the point, it is a *birds'* paradise. And if so many of our avian cousins—the very emblems of fickle mobility—spend time there, it can't be all bad. "Most animals cannot afford to spend time in areas that are unsuited for fulfilling their needs," wrote Southern in a report submitted to the city Department of Public Works. "The greater the variety of wetland bird species on an area, and the more regular their presence on that same area, the greater the regional importance of that area to the species involved."

Southern wrestles with the paradox but can't resolve it. On one hand, 28 water samples from Calumet-area wetlands rarely violated EPA standards, and if they did, "the possibility exists tha[illegible]e nasal gland in at least one species of tern (*Sterni bergii*) may be responsible for eliminating chromium, copper, manganese, lead, and, to a lesser extent, cadmium and zinc." Besides, some of these substances are essential to life in small amounts and only become toxic in larger quantities.

On the other hand, Illinois EPA identified 13 contaminants in southeast Chicago water, 20 in the land, and 28 in the air—many of them heavy metals and fat-soluble chemicals that can accumulate, with deadly effect, in the plants and small animals birds consume even if they are not dangerous in the water itself. Wild creatures have no more evolved sense organs than humans when it comes to identifying and avoiding mud that is 1 part in 500 zinc and lead—the highest concentration Southern found. He limps to the conclusion that there is a "potential hazard to birds that forage within the wetlands. We cannot, however, identify a specific problem or quantify the level of risk, if any, that exists to the various species using the area."

"There are intrepid bands of bird-and-bunny people who come down here regularly," marvels Sharon Pines, "and some hunters"—after ducks and muskrats, apparently. The Chicago Audubon Society owns seven acres just south of 122nd, and has been offered three other parcels in the area. The Lake Calumet Study Committee's annual nature field trip to Lake Calumet, directed by UIC geographer James Landing of the University of Illinois at Chicago, is set for Sunday, May 25.

"Jerry Sullivan got tired of our cracks last year," says Heath, "and he gave us the nature tour. His point was that some creatures do survive and flourish. The cognitive dissonance between the landfills, the incinerator, and Jerry's birds was kind of shock-

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ing."

"Was that the day," asks Pines, "when the green slime was in the ditch?" In my bemused state of double vision, I wonder whether the slime is evidence of water pollution—or a hopeful sign that the ambient chemicals have not sterilized the roadsides.

* * *

"We assumed it was a grass fire when the call came in," says Brad Benning, an emergency response worker at the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency's Maywood office. "When we got on-site, we were surprised to see smoke coming out of crevices in the ground. It was an underground fire."

Getting on-site is not as easy as it sounds. A lot of familiar Chicago things disappear when you get east of State and south of 95th, and one of them is the regular rectangular grid of city streets. The fire has been variously described as being at 11900 S. Cottage Grove, 122nd and Cottage Grove, 119th and Doty—but all these addresses just give a false air of clarity to the location. You can only get there if you know all the right turns.

Plenty of people did get there that first day. "We had about 30 fire trucks and every TV you could think of," says Briand Wu of the Emergency Response Section of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region V. "Everybody wanted a piece of the action."

Wu got the largest piece. Under the "Superfund" law (CERCLA, the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act), his agency has access to more money faster than anyone else to deal with "imminent and substantial endangerment to public health or the environment."

"The biggest problem was water," recalls Richard Fitzpatrick, chief of the Chicago Fire Department's First District. "We had to string a mile and a half of four- and five-inch hose to supply our foam units, and we foamed the entire area. That helped, but it didn't put it out. Some of this stuff has been buried 40 years."

* * *

Like the Loop, southeast Chicago was built on a swamp—an "impassable . . . quagmire" according to federal surveyors who traversed the Lake Calumet area in 1834 and 1835. The difference is—the Loop came first.

"This is a forgotten area," Hazel Johnson told me in her apartment in the 13100 block of South Langley, "especially us south of 127th. We don't hardly get city services. It's like we were a little island unto ourselves."

There's a good deal of truth in this (raise your hand if you've ever been to Hegewisch or Roseland—or ever seen a copy of the *Daily Calumet*), but it's also true that downtown, or powers even farther afield, *have* remembered southeast Chicago when it was convenient—for them.

• They remembered in 1869, when James H. Bowan brought influential businessmen and bankers up the Calumet River in his personal yacht for the opening of the mill that became Wisconsin Steel. That same year, Congress appropriated $50,000 to the Army Corps of Engineers to start dredging a harbor where the Calumet River flows into Lake Michigan. Southeast Chicago was strategically located between the iron ore of the upper midwest and the coal of the lower midwest; it was close to the region's nerve center, but not so close that land was expensive; and it was on the major east-west rail lines, which bunch together to get around the southern tip of Lake Michigan. Even the fact that most of the land was swampy could be turned to advantage: no one had subdivided it for residences, so it was available in large chunks. And as Craig Colten points out in his *Industrial Wastes in the Calumet Area, 1869-1970: An Historical Geography*, the marshes were a perfect match for the steel mills' acids, phenols, cyanides, naphthalene, and slag. "Industrial wastes provided a cheap source of fill and the availability of wetlands ready for reclamation reduced the cost of waste disposal."

• They remembered in 1880, when George Pullman chose to build his utopian company town on the west side of Lake Calumet, far from the evil influences of the city. (The town was built of bricks made of clay excavated from the lake bottom.) To keep the lake from becoming a cesspool, wastes from the Pullman town and railroad car factory were for some years piped south to a "sewage farm" on the Little Calumet River. Part of the Chicago Housing Authority's Altgeld Gardens housing project was later built atop the former sewage farm, which Colten ranks as one of the three most hazardous pre-1940 waste disposal sites in southeast Chicago.

• They remembered in 1890, when electric streetcars were a frightening novelty. According to UIC historian Perry Duis, people feared that the overhead electric lines powering the cars might fall, so "the city council at first relegated the new form of propulsion to outlying districts." First subject of the experiment? A stretch of 83rd Street on the southeast side.

• They remembered when pollution from the Calumet River flowing into Lake Michigan threatened the city's drinking-water intake off 68th Street. The solution: sewer construction was forbidden south of 95th Street until 1907!

The southeast side early acquired its characteristic heavy industries—iron and steel, chemicals, construction materials, and grain handling—and its characteristic un-Chicago-like look, with close-packed residential neighborhoods separated by enormous factories and by stretches of semiwild wetlands. The factory workers lived in the houses and could hunt or fish or farm the open land. On May 1, 1936, the *Hegewisch News* reported "50 acres or more" of small gardens laid out on railroad land by mostly Polish residents at Torrence Avenue, 134th Street, and the Calumet River. As late as 1926, geese and sheep grazed at 108th and Torrence in South Deering. But it wasn't all bucolic: "My mother was here in the 20s and 30s," says Stella Rymus of that neighborhood. "They used to have these big old trucks that came down and would fill in from Torrence going west. Some of that stuff would be smoking when they put it in the ground."

Waste was still a side issue then. Public health experts worried about domestic garbage, not industrial wastes. And southeast Chicago (with adjacent northwest Indiana) was a world-class industrial center, "like the Ruhr Valley in Germany or the Midlands in Britain," says research director Robert Ginsburg of Citizens for a Better Environment. "In World War II, this area produced more than half the steel for the Allied war effort. . . . When the steel and other industries were going strong, people didn't question the health and environmental impacts."

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, in the

following decades the balance shifted—from southeast Chicago as a center of heavy industry and thus (not unreasonably) repository for much of that industry's wastes, to southeast Chicago as a center of waste disposal as such.

In 1940 the city diked off Lake Calumet north of 110th Street and began dumping city garbage there. Colten writes, "City officials considered the marshy area 'particularly suited' for a landfill because of its isolated location, the availability of the property, and the clay soils that underlay the area." The dike, 40 feet wide and 6 feet high, was built of slag and ash from the steel mills.

That landfill—notorious for bad operating practices even in the tolerant 1950s—is now being topped off with sludge. In 1968, the first CID landfill opened; it is now the green "hill" greeting travelers on the northbound Calumet Expressway at Chicago's southern border. Today 80 percent of Chicago's waste—2 million tons a year—is buried in four sanitary landfills in southeast Chicago. The biggest—CID #2, operated by Waste Management, Inc.—takes 1,400 garbage-truck loads in an average day. With this kind of precedent, says Sharon Pines of CNT, "There's just a kind of inexorable feeling about waste being drawn to this area."

In the past eight years or so, as the steel mills shrank and closed and the landfills grew, the imperceptible has become the seemingly inexorable, and southeast Chicago has seen a blooming of antilandfill activism: in the founding of groups like Hegewisch Organized to Protect the Environment (1978), the Committee to Protect the Prairie (Jeffery Manor, 1981), Irondalers Against the Chemical Threat (South Deering, 1982, since dissolved into the United Neighborhood Organization of Southeast Chicago), and People for Community Recovery (Altgeld Gardens, 1982); in the interest of Citizens for a Better Environment (1980); and in the formation of coalitions like the Lake Calumet Study Committee (1980), the Coalition for Appropriate Waste Disposal (1985), and the Citizens United to Reclaim the Environment (1985).

Not that these people agree on what southeast Chicago's history adds up to. On one hand, it may be a resource. "This is the largest open area in the city of Chicago," says Ginsburg. "It contains the only lake in the city [Lake Calumet], and the largest marsh in northeastern Illinois. New York space so well connected to the rest of the city. There aren't many large cities that can afford to let this much open space waste away."

On the other hand, it may be a menace. UIC geography professor James Landing—whom no one has accused of understatement—says, "They know at EPA that the stage is set here for one of the greatest ecological disasters in the history of North America. Beside this Love Canal will be as nothing."

* * *

"In some spots, we could look down into cracks in the ground and actually see flames," says U.S. EPA's Briand Wu. "Every removal action is unique, but we had never had an underground fire before."

Fire chief Fitzpatrick, who has fought fires in the subway and (once) 234 feet below grade in the Deep Tunnel system, advised Wu and colleagues to think of this as being "like a fire in a buildir where the roof has collapsed. You've to find the hot spots and deal with them. It's the only way."

Wu sent up an airplane to take infrared photographs to identify the hot spots; then he had a choice. "We could go to the source and put the fire out, or we could cut off its oxygen from above." In the long run, it would be better to go to the source. But in the short run, digging into the chemical-soaked rubble risked giving the fire a healthy new jolt of oxygen—enabling it to flare up and possibly endangering the apartment complex a quarter of a mile west.

So when foam did not finish the job, Wu had the hot spots covered with two-foot-thick "caps" of heavy, compact clay. By Labor Day temperatures we down to around 250 degrees, and Wu felt safe in having 125 pipes pounded into the ground and thermocouples mounted inside to monitor the soil temperature. EPA spokesperson John Perrecone began referring to the situation at U.S. Scrap as a "temperature differential."

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"When I was working downtown," says Susan Juracich, "I'd come home on the South Shore or the bus, and I'd fall asleep on the way. But they didn't have to call out 'Hegewisch' at my stop. The smell always woke me up first."

Early-morning joggers in Jeffery Manor (northeast of Lake Calumet) have sometimes found their eyes burning and tears running down their faces, says Marian Byrnes. "I've waked up and wondered, what is all this sewer gas in my house? I'd go outside

cognize that there have been relatively few scientific studies of the interactive effects of toxic substances.... The EPA has failed to develop such data, although a review of the legislative history of TSCA reveals that much concern was expressed over these interactive effects more than eight years ago, when TSCA was passed. After all this time, the only statement EPA can make about the Petitioners' concerns regarding the totality of the chemical threat presented in Southeast Chicago and other similar urban industrial areas is: '... such effects possibly exist. Unfortunately, very little is known...'"

EPA shot down that petition in July 1985, leading Ginsburg to ruminate on the catch-22: you can't get action unless you know enough, and unless EPA takes action it won't ever know enough. In September CBE and the United Neighborhood Organization (UNO) of Southeast Chicago filed suit against EPA for wrongfully denying the second petition. Negotiations continue over the lawsuit, but meanwhile the Chicago office of EPA is reportedly planning a "geographical enforcement initiative" centered on southeast Chicago and northwest Indiana. As regional administrator Valdas Adamkus put it in an internal agency memo, "There has not been the degree of environmental improvement in the area that we would like to see."

* * *

The U.S. Scrap fire probably shouldn't have come as a complete surprise. Back in 1980 the disused grain elevator on the property was found to contain 100,000 gallons of corrosive chemicals. More recently, the nonemergency branch of Superfund evaluated the site to see if it qualified for cleanup on the National Priority List. (It did not. It scored 5.9 out of a possible 100, with 28.5 needed to qualify. The PCB mess in Waukegan Harbor has been rated at

were so rotten that they spilled and couldn't even be grappled out; the soil around them had been saturated with chemicals and had to be removed too. The intact drums were placed inside bigger drums ("overpacks"), and the contaminated soil went into dumpsters ("rolloff boxes") covered with plastic. They are still on the property, awaiting final disposal.

EPA's air-pollution-monitoring equipment reportedly detected no airborne contaminants leaving the site during all this, but Marian Byrnes's nose did. "It smelled like creosote, only a whole lot worse," says the retired schoolteacher. "Perrecone said, 'I've got to go back. I'm getting a headache.'"

* * *

Of course, you could argue (though perhaps not in public) that, if we must bury the city's garbage, it should be done all in one area. Better that 90,000 southeast-siders have headaches than all 3 million Chicagoans. Mayor Washington's Solid Waste Task Force blew away that assumption in its report, made public April 22 at Saint Kevin's Church, 105th and Torrence. The 58-member group proposed to recycle 25 percent of Chicago's garbage by 2000 and to burn most of the rest ("resource recovery") to generate steam, hot water, and electricity. This approach would allow the city to "phase out the use of landfills for the disposal of raw, untreated solid waste" — allowing no new ones and allowing only very strictly limited expansion of existing ones.

"UNO considers this a victory," Mary Ellen Montes, formerly of IACT, now of UNO-Southeast Chicago, told the press conference April 22, "not only for ourselves but for the city as a whole." But not all the southeast-siders present agreed. Violet Czachorski, publisher of the *Hegewisch News* and one of the ringleaders of HOPE, asked the mayor to reject the task

pave it over," says Freeman. Byrnes doesn't think so. "An ecological park would not preclude industrial development," she says, "but we think an airport is a poor idea near residential areas. We're aware of the need for jobs, but people do travel long distances to go to work."

These are not the only proto-plans floating around: the Port District, for instance, has its own scheme for filling most of Lake Calumet. The good news may be that local people are at least talking about southeast Chicago's future now, and detailed studies on odor problems on the southeast side and health problems in Altgeld Gardens are under way. "This discussion wasn't taking place five years ago," says Ginsburg. "The southeast side is being brought back in. It's an important part of the city."

The not-so-good news is that the central question about the area—what is there to build on?—remains unanswered. Whether you want a heliport or a park, can the maze of landfills and slag heaps and refuse-filled clay pits and miscellaneous "pirate dumps" support that future? What could it even mean to "clean up" 30 square miles of southeast Chicago, when the nation's environmental agency can't even find a final resting place for a few dozen barrels of paint sludge?

* * *

In 1966, when she was still teaching at Fiske elementary school, Marian Byrnes moved to Jeffery Manor from Hyde Park. Her house sits on a street of small, solid-looking brick homes with a brushy open space behind. "You can see that, coming here, you wouldn't think about landfills. I knew the steel mills were here, but I also knew that Hyde Park was getting the largest weight of particles from the air of any area of the city. So it didn't seem to me I was moving that far. It was a nice area and cheaper than Hyde Park."

After the task force press conference, Channel Two's Mike Flannery asked her, "What's the worst thing about having these landfills here?" Like me, he probably expected some answer like "the smells," or "the headaches," or "the cancer."

"It's not even knowing yet what we may be getting from them," Byrnes replied firmly. "You might say, if we have 31 landfills, what's 32? But the cumulative effect is completely unknown."

"I would never respond glibly to that question," she told me later. "It's the not knowing. It's the uncertainty."

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When I visited the site of the underground fire in February, the chain-link fence protecting it was bent to the ground in at least one spot. Of the three dozen big yellow barrels visible, one-third appeared to be open at the top and a few were lying on their sides. A pile of rusted-out drums lay nearby.

"We are having a problem finding a place to take them," acknowledges Briand Wu. "There's a good site in Michigan, but it has no insurance. There's one in Indiana, but it's out of compliance right now. There's one in Ohio, but it prefers not to deal with Superfund wastes. And Emmelle, Alabama—well, that's a lot of transportation costs. We have set such strict requirements for ourselves....

"But the key is that they are secure on the site. All the drums and rolloff boxes are covered with Visquine. The Chicago Police Department is supposed to make daily stops." So far, putting out the fire and digging up the embankment have cost EPA $450,000—money the agency will try to recoup from any "responsible party" it can find under the Superfund law.

Of course, most of the material illegally dumped there remains where it was buried. Wu can't do anything about that, because it's not an emergency—yet. EPA does now plan to dig more monitoring wells and test pits, take more air samples, and analyze more soil samples in order to reevaluate the site for the National Priority List. It's just possible that its 5.9 score may change during the next year. "We don't know what caused the fire," says EPA's Margaret McCue, "so how can we score it?"

Briand Wu is prepared. He left his 125 pipes in the ground, ready for new thermocouples in case anyone needs to measure the temperature underground again. "Everything is there if we have to go back."